

U.S. Denies Improper Spy Contact

By Robert G. Kaiser
Washington Post Foreign Service

SAIGON, March 22—The U.S. embassy said today that an American diplomat who had contacts with an alleged Communist spy was only doing his job.

An embassy statement named a former U.S. political officer in Saigon as the man pictured in photos displayed by Vietnamese police at a press conference yesterday. But the embassy said the official was only performing his function as a political reporter when he talked with Bul Van Sac, the alleged spy.

Police showed a photo of Sac talking to an American yesterday. The embassy statement said he was Harold Colebaugh, a political officer fluent in Vietnamese who followed internal politics here. Colebaugh left Saigon last year, served briefly on the U.S. delegation to the Paris peace talks and is now in Washington, official sources said.

The police press conference yesterday and the embassy statement today suggest an unusual split between the allies.

The police statements left the impression that the South Vietnamese government might be trying to implicate U.S. officials with Communist spies in the minds of ordinary Vietnamese. And the embassy's rejoinder, U.S. officials acknowledged, was based in part on American indignation over such a suggestion.

In its statement, the embassy said it knew Sac was under investigation as a spy. The statement also said that other U.S. officials besides Colebaugh had met Sac "from time to time in connection with carrying out their official responsibilities."

In its explanation of Colebaugh's contacts with Sac, the embassy said: "As a political reporting officer, Colebaugh normally met with Vietnamese from many walks of life. This is a classical diplomatic function carried out by officers of all nations around the world. In view of this we attach no significance to the photograph in terms of mission interests or personnel."

Colebaugh was known here as a hard-working and competent diplomat with unusually wide contacts among Vietnamese. His extensive knowledge of the Vietnamese language included the most up-to-date diplomatic expressions.